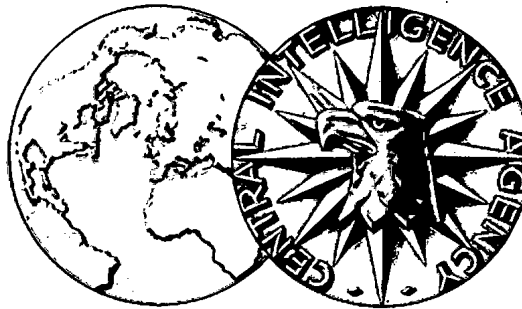


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# THE RYUKYU ISLANDS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE



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## THE RYUKYU ISLANDS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE

### SUMMARY

1. Disposition of the Ryukyu Islands may become one of the most controversial issues in any settlement of Far Eastern problems. Possession or control of these Islands, particularly Okinawa, will give the occupying country: (a) an advantage in either defensive or offensive operations in Asia; (b) a watch post to guard the sea approaches to Central and North China and Korea; and (c) a base for air surveillance over a wide area, taking Okinawa as the center.

2. US control of the Ryukyu Islands would: (a) give the US a position from which to operate in defense of an unarmed post-treaty Japan and US bases in the Philippines and other Pacific Islands; (b) obviate the possibility of the Ryukyus falling under the control of a potential enemy; (c) neutralize, to some extent, Soviet positions in the Kurils, Korea, and Manchuria; and (d) give the US a position from which to discourage any revival of military aggression on the part of the Japanese.

3. Both China and Japan will advance territorial claims to the Islands; the UK and Dominions may support, while the USSR will vigorously protest, US control.

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Note: The information in this report is as of 5 August 1948.

The intelligence organizations of the Departments of State, Army, Navy, and the Air Force have concurred in this report.

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## THE RYUKYU ISLANDS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE

### 1. IMPORTANCE OF THE RYUKYUS.

The Nanshei Shoto, thirty in number, curve in a 775 mile-long chain from the southern tip of the Kyushu to Formosa. In this archipelago the term Ryukyu applies to the islands comprising the Okinawa-gunto and the Amami-gunto, or those islands which lie between the latitudes roughly of 24:45 N and 28:30 N. The Ryukyu Islands are important solely because of their strategic military position in the Far East. Economically the Islands are of no value to anyone except the inhabitants, and the internal political picture is a relatively quiet one.

The value of Okinawa, centrally located in the Ryukyu chain, was demonstrated in World War II. In the Island group there are a total of twenty-two airfields and seaplane bases, eleven of which were constructed on Okinawa during the war (six could accommodate B-29's). There are adjacent islands which, if developed in conjunction with Okinawa, would present an excellent base from which heavy bombers could bring within range the interior of China, any part of Japan and Korea, portions of eastern Siberia including Vladivostok, the whole of the Philippine Islands, Guam and the Marianas, and portions of Southeast Asia and the Netherlands East Indies.

Although they are not ideal, there are several bays and inlets (Naha Ko, Buckner Bay, and Kerama Retto) in the Ryukyus which provide natural harbors. Use of these sites for extended naval supply and tactical operations is limited, however, since from three to six typhoons can be expected annually to cross directly over the Islands and cause severe damage.

Withdrawal of US forces from the Ryukyus following the eventual withdrawal from Japan and Korea would move the US line of defense in the Pacific back to the Marianas. Should an Asiatic conflict develop under these circumstances, the Ryukyus might become subject to control of powers whose interests are antagonistic to those of the US. Any power occupying the Ryukyus and possessing an adequate air potential could control an unarmed Japan. Furthermore, control of the Ryukyus by powers unfriendly to the US would obviously constitute a threat to US Pacific bases as well as tend to circumscribe any future action of US forces operating in the western Pacific.

### 2. CURRENT STATUS.

The Islands, as a part of the former Japanese Empire, have been under US occupation control since the spring of 1945. Neither the Cairo nor the Potsdam Declarations specifically defined the future status of the Ryukyus Islands. Therefore, the way is clear to return the Islands to Japan, transfer them to some other power, or place them under trusteeship. There are indications that the Ryukyuans would prefer to remain under US protection. Nevertheless, in anticipation of a future settlement in the Far East, China has already advanced territorial claims, and Japan has voiced pious hopes; but the major conflict over the disposition of the Islands will involve the US and the USSR.

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### 3. BASIS OF JAPANESE AND CHINESE CLAIMS.

Although China made the first contact with the Ryukyus and the latter sent "tribute" to China and received "presents" in return, the procedure had the typically commercial aspect of the traditional "suzerainty" relationship obtaining between the "Middle Kingdom" and the outlying "tributary" states. By the 17th Century the Ryukyus were paying tribute to both China and Japan. In 1874 the Chinese signed an agreement with Japan in which the Ryukyans were referred to as "subjects of Japan." By 1879 Japan had assumed full governmental responsibility for the Islands, and it continued to administer them as an integral part of Japan Proper until 1945.

### 4. PROBABLE DEVELOPMENTS AND POSITIONS OF INTERESTED POWERS.

Recognition of China's claims would involve a tremendous risk. Chinese control might easily deny use of the bases to the US, and, in the event of final subjugation of the Nationalist forces by the Communists, might give the Soviets easy access to the Islands. Such a development would not only pose for Japan a serious threat of Soviet incursions but would, in effect, compromise the strategic position of the US in the Pacific Area. The failure of the Chinese Nationalists in Formosa since the end of the war indicates the impracticability of awarding the Ryukyus to the Nationalists with agreement that the US maintain a base on Okinawa. Under such an agreement, the resentment of the Ryukyans toward the Chinese, coupled with the confusion of the Chinese Government, might seriously impede US efforts to maintain stability in the area. It may be, moreover, that China is advancing claim to the Islands more as an argument useful for improving its own bargaining position when a Far Eastern settlement is made, rather than with any real hope of seeing the claim satisfied. Even in this case, the pressure of Chinese public opinion may force China to press its claims to a point highly embarrassing to the US.

Even though the political, historical, and ethnical claims of the Japanese to the Islands are substantial, Japan, under its present circumstances, can advance no claim other than one sponsored by one of the Allied Powers. Nevertheless, it is to be expected that the Japanese will attempt to exploit the US-Soviet rivalry in order to regain control of the Islands and thus further Japanese ambitions in the Far East. The US, however, is caught in a contradiction if it supports return of the Islands to Japan. Control of the Islands by a militarily weak Japan would contribute to the over-all instability of the Far East, whereas US commitments as well as US determination to prevent a recrudescence of Japanese aggressive power rules out giving the Islands to a Japan capable of maintaining Ryukyus' security. China, the USSR, the UK, and the Dominions would strongly oppose retrocession to Japan because of fear that such action would foster the extension of Japanese power.

The USSR has indicated a stern adherence to the policy that Japan be "limited to the four main islands." Since the USSR will unquestionably oppose US control, the alternatives acceptable to the Soviets are independence for the Ryukyus or transfer to a China rapidly succumbing to Communist domination. The USSR will presumably prefer the latter.

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At Canberra, in August 1947, the UK favored a US trusteeship over the Islands. Also, the UK has leaned toward turning over to the US the task of molding the security pattern in the Pacific, and therefore will probably lend support to a plan which will allow the Islands to remain under US control.

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